

God's Presence Saves

Isaiah 63:7-9

Lessons from Isaiah: Images of God's Messianic Kingdom on Earth

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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It is God's presence that saves us.

There are some "presents" that we have too much of: a story about a group of chess players who checked into a hotel for a tournament. They were standing in the lobby debating and discussing their recent competitions and victories. After about an hour of this, the hotel manager came running out of his office in frustration and asked them to disburse. When the players asked why they had to move, the manager said: "because I can't stand chess nuts boasting in an open foyer." I had to have one before New Year's!

It has not escaped me that today the Cowboys play the Redskins. Today is the one day I will not root for the Cow...Redskins (I almost slipped there!) People have been persuading me, you know; it's catching up! I am convinced, however, that the presence of Joe Gibbs is substantial on the team and has a tremendous impact of transforming the way that people play. In fact, my wife and I went to the December 5th game when they actually started looking like a football team. And I wondered if my presence didn't have a positive effect on them!

But they won again and I wasn't there.

The presence of God is what saves humanity. It was no messenger of God; it was no angel of God that saves people. During Christmas we tend to become a little pre-occupied with angels and shepherds, and the magi from the East -- all important participants -- Mary and Joseph. All very important 'presences' in the event, but none of them save human beings. It is the presence of God in the person of Jesus, the Christ... the baby... that saves us.

Salvation is personal. It only comes because of the presence of the great Person -- the living God who comes into our lives. In salvation history the focus is not on angels, or even leaders. The focus is on God. Leaders can come and go but God is the one who sustains the saving process. To focus too much on a leader, at any one point in time, is not only superstitious, but it's idolatrous.

It is tempting to think that the right leader will save us. But it's just not true in salvation history. This text from Isaiah caused people to remember Moses -- probably the most memorable leader of Israel of all time. "Remember Moses, God's servant..." the next Scripture says, after the one we read. "...but where is the One who actually saves? (it asks the question)... the One who brought them up from the sea?... the One who put within them the Holy Spirit? The One who divided the waters before them? The One who made for himself an everlasting name? The One who led them up from the depths? It's not Moses. It is only the presence of God that saves.

How does God save? Over a sustained period of time...day-by-day, week-by-week, month-after month -- God's salvation works in human history. We see in the life of Moses in Israel that God saved through external circumstances. He literally moved Israel out of Egypt into a wilderness and into the promised land. That's a clear geographical demonstration of salvation.

God also saved in the desert through the physical frailties... even the verbal frailties of Moses. Moses saying to God, "I can't talk." And God said, "Go." Moses learned to speak on behalf of God. Moses' giftedness was saved.

God also saved in terms of the internal attitudes of the people. Those that did not respond positively to God were given weeks and months and years to change their attitude. And we know that some never did change their attitude, but many did. God saved through the change of peoples' attitudes over many years.

God saved through the release of giftedness. Moses becomes a leader. Moses did not feel he was a leader when he was first called. He did not feel he was worthy or appropriate to the job. But God helped Moses to discover his leadership abilities.

God saved through the confrontation of evil. God said "NO" to Pharaoh. God saves by saying "NO" to evil. God saved in the confrontation of sin. God at one point said, "NO" to Moses: 'Moses because you did the wrong thing, you will not go into the promised land.' That's an act of salvation.

God saved organizationally. At one particular key moment in time, when Jethro comes into the scene (the father-in-law), Moses is called upon to change the entire structure of how Israel exists -- to appoint and empower leaders and to put people into literally hundreds, if not thousands, of groups. God saves in the re-organization of Israel.

God saves in the systemic change of the pattern of how they behaved. They were slaves out of Egypt. They learned to behave as slaves -- and in the wilderness they begin to learn how to behave as responsible priests of God.

God saves because God is walking with people day-after-day, week-after-week, month-after month. We are tempted to think that: the leader saves. We are tempted to think that the right technique saves. I've heard it said about fundraising: if you can just get the right fundraiser or the right fundraising technique, the church will never have to worry about money. That's not what Scripture teaches. It is God who saves us from our bad monetary values, and transforms our thinking about what healthy, God-centered values are, in terms of giving and stewardship.

Some people think that principles save: you just read the Bible and get a few good principles out of it and you'll be saved. Principles are helpful but principles don't save. It's amazing (I'll dare to say it): even the right theology doesn't save you.

Leaders are important. As we are willing to defer to the presence of almighty God, leaders become servants who help people engage the presence of God. Beware of leaders who call more attention to themselves than they do to God. It has come to many peoples' recognition recently that those kinds of leaders are dangerous. If you read any of the works of Edwin Friedman, you discover that he, in his book *Reinventing Leadership*, says that a leader should not be one who calls so much attention to himself, or herself. A leader is one who is humble, but assertive and directive; will not let another person sabotage their sense of direction. But they do not call all the attention to themselves. He uses the example of Abraham Lincoln. He particularly says that Lincoln was a significant leader in history because, before Lincoln, there were at least five presidents who were (he calls them) "gladhanders." These presidents did not have the courage and the guts to act in a responsible way for the country, but kept calling attention to themselves.

And you know where we ended up. Lincoln had to make some tough decisions. But he did not call attention to himself. He didn't even call attention to the North when it won. If you read Ron White's book on the Second Inaugural Address, you will discover that Lincoln -- at the moment where he could have really put the screws to the South, and declare that the North was victorious -- instead, calls both sides to accountability before God. He said, "We were wrong to think that God was on one side or the other. And we both prayed and read the same Bible. But the fact of it is: the question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are connected to God's side." Whether we are in God's presence.

The greatness of Abraham Lincoln is in the sense that he always deferred, in humility, to a greater Power who was present. It is not the leader who saves; it is the presence of God.

Leaders are important. We have just down the street the current disgruntlement going on around Fannie Mae. The way that the news media is carrying it is that it's really a question of leadership style. Will we have leaders who are arrogant and isolated, and lack humility and keep calling attention to themselves? Or we will have leaders who lead the organization with a sense of humility and look out for the best for the investors and the people?

Jim Collins talks about this in the book, *Good to Great: Level 5 leaders do not draw attention to themselves. They draw attention to the organization and to other leaders and to the way the organization can be successful and function. They defer the sense of presence to a higher power. They're not taken with their own presence, but they are taken up with the presence of the purpose of the company, that brings meaning to everyone.*

I see there's a new movie out about the Rwandan massacre of the Tutsi people. It's about a hotel manager who had the courage to not call attention to himself, but to call attention to the people who were standing in need, who would be wiped out. He was able to -- through his own release of ego -- pay attention to those who were hurting, rather than be driven by an ideology that would hurt others.

The presence of God permeates in a peaceful way, people who are open to hear the voice of God. When I was growing up, my parents created some pretty quiet space for me, and for the rest of my brothers and sisters. They wanted us to grow up in a more reflective environment. It's hard to find that kind of environment today. They wanted us to have a little more peace and quiet. I can still remember being by myself and hearing classical music off in the background... wonderful little tune from *La Traviata*... just a descending scale. I can still recall that. And what I recall with that is the sense of quiet presence of my mother. Parents: do you call attention to yourself, or do you call attention to the space for your children to have quiet presence in the presence of God?

It is important that we understand that presence is not about us; it is about the God who saves. It is not about the greatness of the leader. It is not about the special-ness of the servant. It is only about the God who is visible in Jesus Christ. The English poet W. H. Auden, in his little poem, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," describes just a couple of those moments that tend to take away our sense of the presence of God... but then brings it back to focus at a key moment in the poem:

After Christmas, now we must dismantle the tree and put away the decorations. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burned. Having drunk a lot and stayed up late, and attempted quite unsuccessfully to love all of our relatives and in general, grossly overestimated our powers to do so... After Christmas, the Christmas feast is already fading memory; the streets are narrower than we remembered. We'd forgotten the office was such as depressing as it is. But then he comes to the point:

Remembering the stable where, for once in our lives, everything became a 'you'... and nothing was an 'it.' See, at the heart of Christmas, it isn't about the presents we give... the things... the stuff. It is about the presence of the One who comes to us in Christmas, and whether or not we have a relationship with that majestic and powerful Presence in our lives.

I have a bit of a concern about our culture. Right now it seems like we are absolutely bent on being the Grinch Who Stole Christmas - that we are convinced we should take away the concept, or the idea, or even the mention of the presence of God. We don't talk about the Holy One -- we talk about the holi-day. I wonder if we are going to lose our sense of gravity if we lose our sense of presence, because we're so pre-occupied with all the presents that we give and receive.

As you go out today, if you go shopping, think about the presence of God with you. Think about being an ambassador of the presence of God. When you go up to the counter, be kind and patient and gentle -- even when you're in line for an hour and you're really frustrated that you had to return that item back. Be a non-anxious presence. Because people will pay attention to your countenance because you have paid attention to God's countenance.

Let God's presence impact your presence -- that you may be a present of the gift of God for those that are in your life. It is only in Jesus Christ that we find such warm, inviting, consoling, directive and truth-telling presence. We are saved by the presence of God -- not by all the things or by the great leaders... or by the great philosophies. It is God's presence in Jesus Christ that saves us.

Amen.